

Rules of the Game

Familiars (Part Three)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we looked at several **supernatural** and **extraordinary abilities** familiars gain as their masters gain levels. This week, we conclude our look at familiar abilities, and then we consider how familiars function as creatures and how one acquires a familiar.

More Special Abilities

As with the abilities discussed in Parts One and Two, most of these abilities are affected by proximity to the master or the master's level, or both. Most of these abilities are extraordinary or supernatural.



- A familiar can speak with its master if the master is at least 5th level.

The familiar and master can communicate verbally as if they were using a common language. Other creatures do not understand the communication. In effect, the master and familiar have their own private language.

Eavesdroppers can use **spells** such as *tongues* to understand a conversation between a master and familiar.

Speaking with the master is an extraordinary ability; using it usually is a **free action**, just as speaking is.

Familiars that can speak a language (or several languages) can converse with their masters normally if they choose. If they do so, anyone who overhears the conversation understands it, provided that the listener speaks the language used, just as with any other normal conversation.

- When the master is 7th level or higher, a familiar can speak with animals of its kind.

An **animal** that becomes a familiar becomes a **magical beast** (see below), so this ability causes some confusion. An animal familiar can communicate with animals of approximately the same sort as itself (including dire variants) before it became a familiar (as shown on the table below).

Familiar Speaks With

Bat	Normal and dire bats
Cat	Normal and dire felines (housecats to dire tigers)
Hawk	Normal and dire avians (sparrows to eagles)

Lizard	Normal and dire reptiles (lizards to giant constrictor snakes)
Owl	Normal and dire avians (sparrows to eagles)
Rat	Normal and dire rodents (mice to dire rats)
Raven	Normal and dire avians (sparrows to eagles)
Snake	Normal and dire reptiles (lizards to giant constrictor snakes)
Toad	Normal and dire amphibians (frogs and toads)
Weasel	Normal and dire weasels, badgers, wolverines, and ferrets

Speaking with an animal is an extraordinary ability; using it usually is a free action, just as speaking is. Speaking with an animal is otherwise similar to using a *speak with animals* spells (though not magical).

Improved familiars do not have the ability to speak with other creatures of their kind, but many improved familiars already speak one or more languages.

- A familiar with a master of 11th level or higher has **spell resistance**.

The spell resistance rating is the master's level +5. See Part One for a discussion of what constitutes the master's level. If the familiar already has spell resistance (as some improved familiars do), the two don't stack. The familiar uses the higher number.

The rules don't mention how a familiar's spell resistance interacts with the master's spells. I recommend that you do not apply the familiar's spell resistance to spells the caster shares with the familiar. It does, however, apply to spells anyone casts on the familiar, including the master. The familiar can, of course, lower its spell resistance to receive a spell from anyone; see page 298 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

- A master of 13th level or higher can *scry* on her familiar once a day.

This is a spell-like ability that the master gains through the familiar. The power works just like the *scry* spell cast at the master's caster level.

From page 298 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*:

A creature can voluntarily lower its spell resistance. Doing so is a standard action that does not provoke an attack of opportunity. Once a creature lowers its resistance, it remains down until the creature's next turn. At the beginning of the creature's next turn, the creature's spell resistance automatically returns unless the creature intentionally keeps it down (also a standard action that does not provoke an attack of opportunity).

Abilities by Familiar Kind

The animal familiars shown in the *Player's Handbook* grant their masters additional abilities based on their kind, as shown on the table on page 52. As noted in the text accompanying the table, these abilities function whenever the master and familiar are within one mile of each other. **Line of sight** and **line of effects** between master and familiar aren't necessary, but the master and familiar must be on the same plane. The rules don't say so, but I recommend that you treat these abilities as a function of the empathic link between master and familiar (see Part Two). When the empathic link does not function, neither does the benefit the master gets from the familiar.

Familiars as Creatures

As noted in the *Player's Handbook*, an animal that becomes a familiar effectively becomes a magical beast. For purposes of resolving effects that depend on a creature's type, a familiar is not an animal but a magical beast. Spells such as *speak with animals* or *animal growth* do not work on familiars. Likewise, a ranger with animals as a favored enemy would not gain favored enemy bonuses when dealing with the familiar (but a ranger with magical beasts as a favored enemy would).

The change from animal to magical beast has no other effects on the familiar. The familiar's Hit Dice, hit points, ability scores, attack bonus, skills, feats, and saving throw bonuses do not change as a result of the change in type. Once a creature becomes a familiar, however, most of its statistics change to reflect the master, as noted in Part One.

Improved familiars that are not animals retain their type when they become familiars, as noted on page 200 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

Any familiar becomes an extension of the master and its powers improve as the master improves, as noted earlier. A familiar cannot earn experience points or have a class.

In spite of its links to the master, a familiar can think and act on its own. It can perform any number of tasks that don't exceed its physical limits. All familiars are as smart as people (the minimum Intelligence score for a familiar is 6), but usually not as smart as a particularly bright person. This makes familiars much better at most tasks than trained animals. All familiars have some sense of past, present, and future, can count (at least up to 100), and can recognize everyday creatures, objects, and activities. Animal familiars, especially if they have Intelligence scores of 9 or less, are apt to be distracted by things that are important to animals, such as food, other animals, and big, dangerous creatures lurking nearby (and remember that when you're Tiny, just about everyone else seems really big). The master probably will have to remind the familiar about the business at hand.

Unless the familiar actually speaks a language, it cannot relay the contents of any conversations it overhears, even when it can speak with the master. It can, however, describe who is talking, single out the creature who does the most talking, and assess the mood of the speakers. No matter what its Intelligence score, a familiar cannot read or write, so it cannot copy documents or relay their contents. A familiar probably can swipe a document, however.

Acquiring a Familiar

The rules speak of summoning a familiar, but do not go into much detail about the process other than noting that the process takes 24 hours and uses up materials that cost 100 gp. Here are a few thoughts to flesh out the

From page 52 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Familiar	Special
Bat	Master gains a +3 bonus on Listen checks
Cat	Master gains a +3 bonus on Move Silently checks
Hawk	Master gains a +3 bonus on Spot checks in bright light
Lizard	Master gains a +3 bonus on Climb checks
Owl	Master gains a +3 bonus on Spot checks in shadows
Rat	Master gains a +2 bonus on Fortitude saves
Raven1	Master gains a +3 bonus on Appraise checks
Snake2	Master gains a +3 bonus on Bluff checks
Toad	Master gains +3 hit points
Weasel	Master gains a +2 bonus on Reflex saves

1 A raven familiar can speak one language of its master's choice as a supernatural ability.
2 Tiny viper.

process.

A familiar is not a conjured creature and is not subject to effects, such as *protection from evil* or *dismissal*, that banish or hedge out conjured creatures. It is better to think of the process as one of binding a familiar rather than summoning it. To begin, the master must first locate the kind of creature desired. Unless the master has the Improved Familiar feat, the prospective familiar must be a normal, unmodified animal. The prospective familiar cannot be an advanced animal, nor can it be another character's animal companion (through the animal companion class feature) or another character's familiar. If the master has the Improved Familiar feat, the character can acquire a more powerful creature as a familiar, but still must locate the creature first, and the creature cannot be an advanced specimen, nor can it be another character's companion or familiar.

The master can use any convenient means to locate the intended familiar. In cities, one could visit a shop and perhaps purchase a suitable animal. Improved familiars usually take more effort to locate. The familiar should be one or two size categories smaller than the master. Pages 203-204 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* show alternative familiars for masters of various sizes.

After locating the familiar, the master must arrange to keep the familiar nearby for the daylong ritual that binds the two together. Lucky masters choose familiars that are friendly enough to stick around on their own, but sometimes the creature must be tethered or caged to keep it from wandering off.

The ritual fails if the intended familiar is hostile or unfriendly to the master (see Diplomacy skill description). If the intended familiar has an Intelligence score of 3 or higher (before any increase for becoming a familiar), the creature must be friendly toward the character. If the creature's attitude is unsuitable, the master can try any nonmagical means to alter the creature's attitude, such as Diplomacy checks or bribes (or both). The ritual will not succeed if the intended familiar is under any charm or compulsion effect.

A character can have only one familiar at a time and a familiar can have only one master at time. A creature that already is (or has ever been) another character's familiar cannot become a new master's familiar.

The ritual itself can take any form the DM desires; however, a few gestures, chants, and perhaps some drawings sketched on the floor around the pair -- all repeated at intervals throughout the day -- is all that's necessary.

What's Next?

That's all the time we have this week. Next week, we'll briefly consider the ins and outs of protecting a familiar during combat and just what happens to a familiar or master when one of the pair dies.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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